

EUROBAROMETER 69

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Spring 2008

NATIONAL REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY **BULGARIA**

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What is the state of mind of Bulgarians as citizens of the EU almost one and a half years following the accession of their country to the EU, and how does the picture of Bulgarian public opinion compare to that in current and future EU Member States? To answer these questions, a national analysis of the results of the 2008 Spring Eurobarometer survey is presented below.

The interviews for the survey in Bulgaria (25 March to 7 April) coincided with dynamic events in the country, such as the freezing of EU funds, as well as political upheavals and government reshuffles. These affected national public opinion on the most important issues of concern to Bulgarians as well as their views on the country's EU integration and the future of the Union.

One thousand Bulgarians responded to the questions of the Spring Eurobarometer survey, carried out on request of the European Commission's Communication DG in all EU Member States, in the Candidate Countries and in the Turkish Cypriot Community. The Bulgarian sample is homogeneous and, as in all the other countries surveyed, it is representative of the opinion of citizens aged 15 and over.

The national analysis of the data, which is carried out simultaneously in all countries, aims to provide a picture of Bulgarian public opinion against the trends and changes in national and European public opinion, compared with the previous six-month period and since Bulgaria was first included in the Standard Eurobarometer in the Autumn of 2004. The particular focus of comparisons with other countries is to show the opinion of the "average Bulgarian" versus the "average EU" citizen. Frequent comparisons are also made with the other new Member States, including Romania, which joined the EU at the same time as Bulgaria.

The fight against crime – a priority for Bulgaria and for the European Union

Under the immediate influence of the national events, **concern about crime**, which represented one of the most important issues for people in the spring, has gone up (+13 points¹) and registered its highest score (36%) since the country's inclusion in the Eurobarometer surveys in 2004. Compared to other countries, only in Ireland, Croatia and the United Kingdom is concern about crime higher than in Bulgaria, while, in neighbouring Romania, it has decreased (-6 points, to 16%) and remains more insignificant for local people.

Since concern about crime in Bulgaria is at its highest, the view of Bulgarians that **the fight against crime should be the most important priority on the EU agenda** has increased by 16 points to 41%. For the first time, the fight against crime dominates instead of the persistent opinion that EU institutions should focus mainly on social issues (39%). The average EU citizen shares the Bulgarian view regarding crime, but according to him/her, the protection of the environment is of equal importance (33%).

¹ This term will be used henceforth to mean "percentage point"

Trust in European institutions remains higher than trust in the national institutions

Mistrust in national political institutions reaches its highest score since the country's EU membership – in political parties - 83% (+5 points), in the parliament - 79% (+6 points) and in the government - 73% (+6 points).

Bulgarians express a more positive and more engaged attitude to the EU institutions. The “don't know” answers are on the decline and Bulgarians are now clearly demonstrating their trust in the European Commission (51%), the Council of the EU (47%) and the European Central Bank (48%). Trust in the European Parliament remains the highest of all EU institutions (58%). While the European Commission has lost the trust of the absolute majority of EU citizens (-3 points, 47%), in Bulgaria, it is on the rise (+5 points) and has reached its highest score since the country's EU membership.

Defending the interests of all EU citizens and the democratic way of decision-making are the main reasons for trust in the EU institutions, pointed out by both Bulgarians and by the average EU citizen. There is, however, a minor degree of mistrust in the EU institutions which is explained by the fact that they are “too far away from ordinary citizens”, as well as with the lack of information about them and some general stereotypes.

Bulgarians and the average EU citizen are equally convinced that transparency of national and EU institutions is of high importance (above 80%). Both Bulgarians and EU citizens assign higher importance to the transparency of national institutions (by 3 points), than to EU institutions. Alongside this, citizens are more critical in their assessment of how transparent are their national institutions, compared to the EU institutions.

Bulgarians are amongst those who judge most negatively the transparency of their state administration (-70²), while they have no opinion regarding the EU administration (37% don't know). Only in Lithuania (-71), Greece (-72) and Latvia (-72) is the public opinion more negative than in Bulgaria.

There is a new crisis of trust in the institutions of public order and security, which is in sharp contrast to elsewhere in the EU. The index of trust in Bulgarian police has decreased from -15 to -40, and in the army from 18 to 8 points, compared to the EU, where citizens trust most of all these institutions - the army (70%) and the police (63%).

Bulgarians demonstrate the lowest trust (25%) and highest mistrust (65%) in their national police of all the countries covered by the Eurobarometer poll. Only in Bulgaria and in Hungary is the army not trusted by the majority of those polled. This dramatic change can be explained as the public reaction to the events that shook Bulgarian society and coincided with the period when the interviews were taken. As a result, public opinion has become more engaged in its attitude towards institutions, which

² This figure represents the index, which is calculated as the difference between the positive and the negative answers

is expressed by the decrease in the “don’t know” answers and the increase in both positive and negative views.

Considering the high level of involvement in EU affairs among Bulgarians, recorded in the Autumn Eurobarometer poll, it could be argued that people expect the dialogue with national institutions to finally take place.

Bulgarians are less pessimistic than the average EU citizen, although they continue to be the least satisfied with their way of life

The lowest level of life satisfaction among all EU citizens is demonstrated again by the Bulgarians (59%). Regardless of this, since the end of 2006, the Eurobarometer has registered a continuous trend of increasing life satisfaction, which has now reached its highest level of 40%, i.e., 2 points higher than in 2007. This positive trend can be seen as a demonstration of the positive effect of EU membership.

It may be argued that this persistent lack of satisfaction with life makes Bulgarians more resilient to the new economic realities and does not cause such a big concern among them by galloping prices and financial crisis, characteristic of the citizens of the other Member States (and especially the “old” ones).

For the next year, Bulgarians do not foresee a change in the economic situation of their country (39%), while the average EU citizen is already convinced that it will become worse (+20 points, 46%).

Fewer Bulgarians (40%) than EU citizens (45%) consider that the situation in their country is going in the wrong direction.

Almost half of the Bulgarians polled (47%), but less than the EU average (52%) express the opinion that their purchasing power has decreased over the last five years.

A positive, but more moderate assessment of the benefits of Bulgarian EU membership

An absolute majority of the Bulgarian poll supports the country’s EU membership (51%). This is very close to the EU average (52%). However, public support for EU membership in Bulgaria is lower than in neighbouring Romania (64%) and in Poland (65%) which top the new Member States’ league.

The feeling of increased personal security, which Bulgarians assign to their EU membership, is on the rise (+2 points. 53%). This figure now exceeds the EU average of 49%. However, people are less convinced than before, both in Bulgaria (-2 points, 41%) and in the Member States as a whole, that EU membership is a reason for the economic stability of their countries.

For the first time, Bulgarians who share the view that their country has gained from its EU membership do not represent an absolute majority (47%, - 5 points). Negative opinions are also on the rise and reach their highest score of 23% (+9 points). The reason for this may be the financial sanctions imposed by the European Commission.

Bulgaria now ranks last among the countries whose citizens hold the view that they have gained from their EU membership. On the other hand, there are only three Member States, where public opinion on this issue is more negative than in Bulgaria: Hungary, the United Kingdom and Austria, where negative views are predominant. In Italy, the public opinion does not express a clear view on this issue.

Those Bulgarians who are convinced that their country has gained from its EU membership point to the following arguments:

- ❖ **New work opportunities** (41%) – of importance mainly to citizens in the new Member States;
- ❖ **EU's contribution to the economic growth** of the Member States (36%) – one of the most important reasons for all questioned in the “old”, new and future members of the EU (EU27 – 30%);
- ❖ **EU's contribution to the strengthening of national democracy** (34%) – of highest importance for the Balkan countries and above all for Romania (40%), while Bulgaria ranks second.

Unlike Bulgarians, the average EU citizen holds the opinion that the most important reason to benefit from the EU membership is co-operation with other countries (37%).

Bulgarian euro-optimism is on the rise

Bulgarians are more upbeat than fellow EU citizens in their views that the situation in the EU is going in the right direction (BG – 54%, EU27 – 42%, a distance of 12 points). Along with Romanians, Bulgarians rank among those who are most optimistic (RO-61%) and least pessimistic (6% for both countries) in the entire Eurobarometer poll.

Bulgarian optimism about the future of the EU is up (by 6 points, to 68%) and is now higher than the EU average (63%). Against the background of shared enthusiasm among the EU member and candidate countries, Bulgarians appear as more moderate optimists than their neighbours in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, where people are most upbeat on this issue.

It is the first time that Eurobarometer has recorded such a high degree of trust and such a low level of mistrust in the EU among Bulgarians. Nearly two-thirds of the Bulgarian poll now share their trust in the EU (+5 points, 63%), while only less than one fifth (19%, - 4 points) do not trust it. To the same degree as the Irish (19%) and close to the Estonians (17%), Bulgarians are now among those who express the least mistrust in the EU.